

If I had known that trying to join the MAGFest Board of Directors would end as badly as it did, I never would have started.

That's how I wish I could begin this letter. But that would imply that my trying to join the board was a critical turning point in getting us to where we are today; where I have to write this document and you have to read it. It would give me some agency in the sequence of events, instead of being just another domino.

The truth is that the board had set themselves on an irreversible crash course long before the staff election began. That's exactly *why* I ran—I saw how badly things had been going, I saw my friends, on the board and off, being hurt in the same predictable ways, and I thought that I could fix it.

At MAGFest, I was a founding chair for both MAGLabs and MAGWest, and ran Super MAG registration for several years. I've sat on another non-profit event's board for over 3 years. I've run several non-MAGFest events. The point is, I've seen an awful lot of shit and an awful lot of mismanagement, and felt uniquely qualified to empathize with MAGFest's board and help them make meaningful progress forward. I thought I understood the challenges they were facing, and why they acted the way they did. I dreamed about a future where I could help smooth out the conflicts and issues the board had been experiencing, and get people to work together in the true MAGFest fashion. I had the moral authority; I felt that all I needed to do was join the board and get the formal authority in order to finally have enough sway to bring about real change. I ran in the staff election and came in second, behind Josiah. This began the process of the board considering me for a one year board term.

The initial red flag came when the board refused to add us to the first board meeting occurring after our election win, where they planned to make several decisions about the fate of Super MAGFest 2021. Their rationale for it was that since we hadn't been part of the discussions until that point and they didn't know us well enough (despite having known both of us for years), we would "change the dynamics of the meeting" and might derail things by asking too many questions. We did our best to compromise, including offering to be listen-only and reminding the board that we had a significant amount of prior knowledge about the current situation from our other roles in the org, but the board was unwilling to budge. This turned out to be the first example in a larger pattern of them keeping us out of key conversations and decisions.

The next, and biggest, red flag was when the board decided they would be putting us through an "onboarding process". They claimed the process was standard for everyone joining the board, though they were unable to provide evidence of this. (When we investigated, it seemed the only prior staff-elected board member, Big Adam, had been invited to board meetings starting 9 days after his election, and was voted onto the board shortly after.

I assumed the onboarding process would be straightforward, useful, and well-documented, like any onboarding process should be. The process the board put together was none of those things. Instead, it was based almost exclusively on attending weekly "mosh pit" meetings with

them. At these meetings, they took the opportunity to bring out every personal failing or professional mistake they had ever seen from us, and required us to defend ourselves to their satisfaction.

Amended at Nov 19, 16:06 PT: I have added the following screenshots of the communication between myself, Josiah, and the board regarding our onboarding. The election committee was cc'ed and can independently verify these emails if desired. A text transcription of these emails can be found in the BOD Onboarding Emails document in this folder.

Jack Boyd <jack@magfest.org>

Jul 13, 2020, 11:02 AM

to election, Josiah, shir, bod

Election Committee,

The board would like to first officially thank all the members of the Election Committee for their work in helping coalesce all of the volunteer recommendations into a single set of suggestions for potential new board members, especially during this pandemic period. We know this was no easy task in terms of time devoted, fielding questions/concerns, and ensuring a fair election.

Selected Candidates,

Congratulations on the victory Josiah and Shir. We would like to extend our invitation to you to join us for one of our regularly scheduled Board Mosh Pit sessions taking place on August 8th from 8-10 p.m. EDT. Please note that this is not a regular meeting of the board but is instead more like our regular cathartic group vent session where we are able to come together and work through interpersonal issues and tackle tough topics with no required voting or decision making. Please know that this is not instead of a board meeting, we will be inviting you to our first regular board meeting in August, this is our way of encouraging you to become acclimated to the group. We are planning to have you attend meetings for four months prior to being added to the board. During this training phase, you will be invited to all board meetings and will have a voice in the official board meetings. This is the process that the board used in adding Big Adam to the board and was the same process for Joel and me.

Thanks,
Jack Boyd
President, Board of Directors
MAGFest, Inc.
www.magfest.org

Shir Goldberg <shir@magfest.org>

Jul 13, 2020, 2:16 PM

to Jack, election, Josiah, bod

Hi Jack & Board,

Thank you for the welcome, and we'll look forward to joining you on August 8th.

Josiah and I would like to propose reducing the 4 month ramp-up phase to 1 month. We understand that 4 months is the standard protocol, but things aren't standard for MAGFest right now. Especially with how soon decisions will need to be made regarding Super MAG and the inevitable increased workload on the board either way, we'd like to start helping in our elected capacity as soon as possible.

The voices of the staff and volunteers will be increasingly important over the coming months, as will maintaining the sanity of everyone currently on the board. Josiah and I are long-time volunteers who are intimately familiar with how the board and MAG operates, and we're eager to get to work.

- Shir & Josiah

Jack Boyd <jack@magfest.org> Jul 14, 2020, 4:53 AM
to Shir, Jack, election, Josiah, bod

Shir and Josiah,

I want to clarify a miscalculation and I apologize for it. In the July 2019 board meeting, the board discussed asking me if I'd be interested in joining the board. On August 3rd, I was informed and I confirmed my interest in joining. It was requested of me to speak with board members to help them make the decision on as me or not. I spent about 40 total hours talking to board members prior to the August 16th board meeting where I was accepted into this training period. On October 20th, I was officially added to the Board. During this training period, I had access to emails, slack channels and meetings, which I had equal opportunity to speak my mind, but did not have an official vote. This was not the same with Big Adam since his selection was a completely different process. We are absolutely willing to consider lowering the time period to 1-3 months depending on what happens in the organization over this time period.

What I'd be happy to do now is to start including both of you to some of the talks I am currently having with other board members, start the training early, and start talking with either/both of you when we're available. You're also welcome to talk to other board members, though for now we must ask that any discussions with PB or Bunny be approved by PB, due to their current workload.

Thanks,
Jack Boyd
President, Board of Directors
MAGFest, Inc.
www.magfest.org

Airing grievances and clearing the air can be an incredibly important step in building trust between two parties. However, the airing of grievances was one-sided and unproductive. While anything we had ever done during our MAG careers was fair game for the board to bring up, any time we expressed doubt or frustration about the way the board had done things, it was used as further ammunition against us.

One example that stood out was when I attempted to provide feedback in the private board channel to a board member about their use of DMs instead of public conversations.

Shir 10:35
[redacted], re [this thread](#) from yesterday, I think this is a great example of a conversation that would have been beneficial to have in public instead of DMs. Based on your summary, it sounded very high-level and like nothing sensitive was shared, and the question/answer is relevant to multiple people. Generally, one of the clearest ways we can demonstrate the board's commitment to transparency is pulling as much stuff out of DM and into public channels as possible (which also ties in with MAG's general cultural principles).

Image transcription:

A Slack message from Shir at 10:35 AM that reads,

[redacted], re [this thread](#) from yesterday, I think this is a great example of a conversation that would have been beneficial to have in public instead of DMs. Based on your summary, it sounded very high-level and like nothing sensitive was shared, and the question/answer is relevant to multiple people. Generally, one of the clearest ways we can demonstrate the board's commitment to transparency is pulling as much stuff out of DM and into public channels as possible (which also ties in with MAG's general cultural principles).

Instead of the board taking that as an open and honest attempt to give feedback, it was interpreted as a personal attack. Josiah and I were accused of “holding the board to a higher standard than the rest of MAGFest” and inventing the idea that MAGFest had always pushed for public channels over DMs. This is not the only example of them responding to constructive criticism with anger and hostility, but it is the one that upsets me the most.

Amended at Nov 19, 16:00 PT: I have uploaded a folder titled “BOD Conversation Screenshots” with redacted screenshots of the conversation that followed. Names are replaced with consistent colors to make following the conversation easier, while also shifting blame off of individuals to the board’s collective mentality. These screenshots were taken by Josiah, so they include some artifacts of that, such as his name being highlighted. I can independently confirm this is the conversation as it occurred.

The truth is that I was holding them to the same standard as the rest of MAGFest—and even if I hadn’t been, *shouldn’t* the board of directors, the ultimate governors over the entire organization, be held to a higher standard? To refute the idea that I was making up MAG’s cultural belief in using public channels over DMs, I had to provide screencaps of the numerous times Dom and others at MAG had said as much for the board to believe me.

The most charitable interpretation I can come up with this behavior is that the board is so disconnected from the rest of MAG, they genuinely have no idea what is and isn’t standard for the staff. The least charitable interpretation, which I became more inclined to believe with every further incident, is that the board chose somewhat intentionally to manipulate and gaslight me in the hopes of getting me to align with their view of how things at MAG should be.

Josiah’s and my responses in that conversation, which were calm, reasoned, and honest, were then brought up as further examples of our failings in the next mosh pit meeting. The board even went as far as critiquing our use of emoji reactions during that conversation—that was the level of scrutiny applied to every aspect of our behavior.

The other critiques the board brought against me were similarly absurd. They asked me repeatedly to commit to never publicly disagreeing with the board or the Executive Director, and told me they considered my experience on other boards a negative, as I might try to “change MAGFest to be like other events”. And still, I consider myself lucky, after watching them grill Josiah on much more personal and painful matters. I’ve always worked hard to be exceedingly polite and professional at MAG, and the board was unable to find much fault with me, beyond not wholeheartedly agreeing with their worldview. I was frustrated and sad with how we were being treated, but ultimately willing to go through it to try and help MAGFest and do what’s best for the organization. And I think it’s likely they would have wound up adding me to the board if not for what happened next.

A few weeks ago, I was pulled into some ultra-secretive conversations and made aware of a board member who felt compelled to make allegations against Josiah. These allegations and the board’s decision on what should happen to Josiah were made entirely outside the realm of

all existing processes at MAG, and without the involvement of any relevant parties. People like Faith, the full-time Director of Volunteer Infrastructure and Josiah's manager, and the Safe Committee, a group designed to ensure the board stopped making unilateral decisions on situations involving harassment, were not involved until the process and decisions had already been finalized. Everything was done entirely within the board, in accordance with their own interpretation of the situation, their inherent biases, and what they thought would be best.

It is not my place to speak on those allegations in detail, and Josiah has been threatened by the board member in question to the extent he no longer feels comfortable publicly sharing the details either. But the conversation left me shaken at the level of paranoia and fear the board displayed; their intense and vitriolic reactions to a situation that did not seem to warrant it; and their inability to make decisions according to the norms and procedures of the rest of the org. The actions the board was planning to take felt incredibly disproportionate and inappropriate to the substance of the complaints themselves, as well as the complete lack of documentation provided. To me, it felt very much like another example of the board prioritizing themselves and their needs over the good of MAGFest, and worse, abusing methods designed to keep staffers and volunteers safe for their own benefit.

I could not stand idly by, or worse, actively support such a blatant abuse of power. The board was on the brink of firing and permanently banning Josiah—a punishment that in no way fit the actions he had been accused of and that directly violated a significant amount of MAGFest precedent. After several hours of conversation with the board, I got them to agree to loop in additional parties, such as Faith and the Safe Committee, for input before proceeding. I reached out to Josiah to let him know that the board may try to inappropriately and permanently remove him from staff, and he should be prepared for what might be coming down the line. We worked together to prepare a response to the board that was calm, reasonable, and de-escalatory, in an attempt to avert the worst-case scenario of the board deciding he was an immediate danger to the organization and forcibly removing him over undocumented and unreviewed allegations. And finally, I worked with the board member making the allegations in an attempt to both de-escalate and properly document the allegations, so that the right parties outside of the board would be able to make the best judgement call on the situation. Although I did not feel the allegations merited the response called for by the board, I did, and still do, want every person at MAGFest to feel safe. My action and participation was rooted in a love for MAGFest and its people, and a desire to bring all parties to the best, safest, and most just outcome in an inherently terrible and unjust situation.

On the Saturday night of MAGCon, two members of the board pulled me into a call to let me know they suspected me of leaking information and breaching NDA, and were delaying the board meeting the next day, where they had been planning to vote me onto the board, to conduct an investigation. This investigation involved reading private documents, messages, and emails between employees and staffers; calling in employees and staffers for private meetings where they were harassed and threatened; and perpetuating the culture of fear and secrecy that the board has entrenched as their core values during their terms.

I have a stellar track record of confidentiality, both at MAGFest and beyond. I ran Super Registration, which handles all attendee contact information and payment, and am currently a lead in the Hotel department, which handles numerous contracts and sensitive negotiations with the Gaylord. I take matters of privacy and secrecy incredibly seriously—ask any of the board members I've worked with over the years. This was not a matter I was willing to keep private. Doing so would have gone against not just my ethical code, but common human decency.

The NDA leak they are accusing me of is based on an NDA that has been twisted and abused as another method of preventing honesty, transparency, and working against the real MAGFest's core values. I am not willing to work somewhere with an NDA that is used as a tool to abuse and silence staffers. I am not willing to work somewhere with an NDA that prevents me from being a good person. I am not willing to work somewhere with an NDA that requires me to compromise my own ethics. I am not willing to work somewhere with an NDA that prevents me from doing the right thing.

Although the "investigation" has not officially concluded, I have no doubt at this point the board views my actions as an irreversible break in trust, and will never be willing to vote me on. That's fine with me. I never wanted to be on the board for the sake of being on the board. I wanted to be on the board to make MAGFest better, and work towards an environment where everyone felt safe, respected, and happy. The current board is unequivocally the wrong place for that. Making it the right place will require nothing short of starting from scratch with a new group of members who are willing to work together, openly and honestly, to build a community in accordance with MAGFest's core values.

Ultimately, the onboarding accomplished what the board wanted it to. The process was never designed to bring us on to the board; it was designed to keep us off. It showcased the fatal flaws of the current members and their culture in such glaring detail that I walked away knowing beyond a reasonable doubt I had no desire to be a part of their machine. I started this journey dreaming about a world where the board, office, staff, and volunteers worked together in harmony. I ended it understanding that there is no future like that for MAGFest while the current board remains in power. I wish this wasn't the case. None of us want to be here, sharing these details or writing these letters. The board has left us with no other recourse. At this point, all we can do is hope that the people reading this understand what we've been through and are willing to stand with us for a better MAGFest.